

Music for Contemporary Christians: What, Where, and When?

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What music is appropriate for Christians? What music is appropriate in worship? Is there a difference between music appropriate in church and music appropriate in a youth rally or concert? Is there a difference between lyrics appropriate for congregational singing and lyrics appropriate for a person to sing or listen to in private? Are some types of music inherently inappropriate for evangelism?¹

These are important questions. Congregations have fought over them and even split over them.² The answers given have often alienated young people from the church and even driven them to reject God. Some answers have rejuvenated congregations; others have robbed congregations of vitality and shackled the work of the Holy Spirit.

In some churches the great old hymns haven't been heard in years. Other churches came late to the "praise music" wars, and music is still a controversial topic. Here, where praise music is found in the church service, it is probably accompanied by a single guitar or piano and sung without a trace of the enthusiasm, joy, emotion, and repetition one hears when it is used in charismatic churches. Many churches prefer to use no praise choruses during the church service, some use nothing but praise choruses, and perhaps the majority use a mixture. What I call (with a grin) "rock 'n' roll church," where such instruments

¹ Those who have recently read my article "*The Christian & Rock Music: A Review-Essay*," may turn at once to the section headed "The Scriptural Basis." Those who haven't read it should read on.

² I watched attendance at one large church drop by half over several years when a new minister of music ruled that only "serious music," preferably instrumental and played by professional musicians, could be performed there. If there had to be congregational singing, it should be limited to a handful of great anthems. The pastor, cowed by this woman, accepted the argument that God could not accept as worship or praise what was imperfect.

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as drums and the electric guitar and bass are used for the song service, is rare. Even where one finds such services, the singing is sometimes lackluster and attendance sparse, so clearly such services are not the sole answer to tepid worship. Few would consider music the heart of the gospel, but it is still a topic that inspires strong statements and hurt feelings.

What is generally called Contemporary Christian Music (or CCM) embraces a wide variety of musical styles. What they have in common is that they are contemporary, in some way Christian, and music. CCM includes the work of Ralph Carmichael and the Gaithers (the first recently deceased and the others elderly). It includes both the gentlest of folk music and the hardest of heavy metal and rap. It includes praise songs, scripture songs, country music, white gospel and black gospel, jazz and blues, reggae and ska, celtic music, bluegrass, and much more. What draws the most attention—and the most concern—is Christian rock of various sorts. The sales are immense, and so is the influence. Some people find this deeply threatening.

In this essay I will present a scriptural basis for making decisions about music. I will then share a number of suggestions about how Christians might best use music, whether as entertainment, as worship, or as a combination of the two, and whether personally, in groups, or in the church setting. My approach is to allow freedom where there is no harm, especially when this builds faith. I will urge tolerance of all differences that are not sinful and recognition that differences in taste or practice are not necessarily sinful. However, I will also uphold the need for congregational unity and consideration of the “weak brother” (1 Cor 8).

Where I’m Coming From

What follows will be better understood if I explain the perspective from which I view the issue. I began listening to rock music in 6th grade. I can still whistle most of the top forty hits of that year, should I hear their titles. By the time I was sixteen I was playing electric guitar in a band, subscribing to *Rolling Stone*, and experimenting with drugs. In college and graduate school I listened to rock for hours every day—whenever I was studying or writing or driving or reading. My mind was filled with the music and the words. I couldn’t get them out of my head. My actions—or at least my dreams—were influenced by these words to some extent.

About the time I got married, when I was 28, I began walking with God, or at least toward him, and I began to realize the music I listened to was not godly and was holding me back. I began pleading with God to free me from it if that was his will. One night I awoke sensing that God had opened the door to freedom, if I were willing to walk through it. I spent the rest of the night looking at each album, looking at the names of the songs and thinking about them, then renouncing them. By morning I had said goodbye to 300 albums.

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I consider my deliverance from this music to be supernatural. I can still recall the songs, but I don't choose to, and they aren't running through my head. It should be clear from this confession that if in this essay I speak favorably about Christian rock music or other forms of CCM, it is not because I like or listen to this music myself.

I don't often listen to music of any sort these days—I prefer silence—but when I do it's usually hymns: choral, *a cappella*, orchestral, folk, or bluegrass. For me, the great old hymns found in our hymnal have a wonderful ability to focus the mind on God and help one say no to temptation.³ I enjoy classical music of many sorts, though I seldom listen to it. I also enjoy some types of jazz and swing, especially clarinet solos, and bluegrass, though I rarely listen to them. I used to love opera, especially Mozart and Verdi, but when I read the librettos in English and discovered their focus on sin, I stopped listening, though I still enjoy the overtures.

I took an instant dislike to praise songs when I first heard them. The primary reason was that they were replacing the hymns I loved—so rich and meaningful—with simplistic melodies, words, and emotions. The second reason is that I'd heard praise songs sung well, so they powerfully moved the audience, but never in my own denomination. However, I've come to understand that praise songs really are what they claim to be: they do praise God, and well. Though I can't yet bring myself to sing them in church, I no longer fight them, and I enjoy accompanying with my guitar those who sing them. Who knows, someday I may burst into song.

Because I know what it's like to be virtually addicted to rock 'n' roll music and have its incitements to sin running through my head, for many years I was very much opposed to CCM. Two insights have turned my thinking around. A few years ago I was invited to speak at a youth conference at the University of North Carolina. Sunday morning, driving home to Pennsylvania, I grew weary of sermon tapes and turned on the radio, looking for some classical music. I was approaching Lynchburg, Virginia, Jerry Falwell country, and just about the only thing on the radio other than rock music was various sorts of contemporary Christian music. I had virtually no knowledge of this music, though I had scoffed at it for years.

I found myself listening to a song, and before long several hours had passed, and God was revealing to me a lesson as important (to me) as Peter's lesson about not calling people unclean in Acts 10–11. I realized that while I didn't like this rather sappy music, vaguely country-western, it was sung from

³ When thoughts I'd rather avoid enter my head, I often begin whistling a hymn, because that seems to drive out temptation. Because I associate the music with the words, merely humming the melody keeps me close to God. I've also found that the lyrics are often stirring and beautiful. My three-tape collection of 155 hymn lyrics read as poetry is available from American Cassette Ministry (www.americancassette.org or 1-800-233-4450). Wonderful though the melodies may be, they often obscure the beauty of the verse.

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the heart. These were songs about struggle and victory, about searching and finding, about turning to God for help over the little things. These weren't hymns. They weren't appropriate for church. But they were Christian songs, whether I liked them or not. I saw, as if on a screen, housewives doing their chores, struggling to keep their faces turned to God, struggling to believe, struggling to put meals on the table and keep clothes on the kids. I sensed their radios on, filling their lives with songs I scorned, yet songs that touched them and strengthened their faith. May God rebuke those who disparage music that draws people to God, however it may sound. It's odd how quick we are to call sinful what we simply don't like.

Insight number two. The next summer my sons Paul and Peter returned from a week at junior camp excited about the camp theme song—a song from a Christian rock CD. Paul sang it to us in the car. I was astonished that such music was heard at camp. Why would counselors introduce my children to music from which I'd carefully shielded them, not wanting them to have the trouble with rock music I had had? My first thought was to say, "I do not want you to sing that song again." But I kept my mouth shut, not wanting to have an argument on the way home. I could tell them later.

That night Paul, then eleven, came to my bedroom. "Dad," he said, "you know that song we learned at camp? The words really got me thinking, and I decided to recommit myself to God."

I was thrilled, of course, but I could hardly breathe. In my heart I was saying, "Oh, God, I nearly bawled him out for liking a song that brought him to you. Thank you so much for shutting my mouth!" Now thirteen, Paul dreams of becoming a youth pastor. We've made a deal: he can listen to any music he likes, so long as it's Christian. He listens to Christian rap and Christian punk, and we have wonderful, open-hearted conversations about the relative quality of the bands he likes and the effect of their lyrics, and about God and the Bible.

There is nothing I want more than for my children to share eternal life with me. May God rebuke those who turn away these little ones from God and his church because they don't realize God can be praised in any language and with any music. To deny this is to deny the clear evidence of conversions and transformed lives.⁴ May our teaching be based on evidence, not on our prejudice.

⁴ Sam Leonor, bass player and vocalist for the band Big Face Grace, writes, "I am a witness to the fact that listeners (and players) of Christian Music have and are being humbled by the majesty of God, and they have been and continue to be convicted of His moral claims upon their lives" (personal e-mail, 11 February 2002). Like three other members of his band, Leonor has an M.Div degree. He is the campus chaplain at La Sierra University. I met him at the youth conference mentioned above. I was at first prejudiced against Leonor, as at the time I was very much against any type of rock music. However, I liked what he said to the students at the conference, and we ended up talking together for a couple hours. I was impressed by his dedication to doing God's will and his commitment to Bible teaching. The shock of meeting a theologically conservative rock star (I'm exaggerating) prepared me, I think, for the insights I received the next day as I drove home listening to CCM on the radio.

The Scriptural Basis

There are those who try to base their principles of music on biblical references to musical instruments and musical performance, most of them in the Old Testament.⁵ This approach is less useful than they think. First, there is no reason to think we should restrict ourselves to instruments mentioned there. The ones mentioned are the ones they had to work with, and we simply have more now than they did then. Some try to suggest that certain instruments—especially rhythm instruments—are not mentioned in connection with Israel’s worship because they were associated with pagan worship or secular entertainment. There is no biblical evidence for this at all, unless one chooses to twist and misread the texts. There is no reason why a piano or organ should be considered more acceptable, from a biblical viewpoint, than an electric guitar or bass (though I will provide certain cautions later in this essay).

Second, the Israelite temple services give us little useful guidance on music, because there is only a slight relation between the temple services and our church services. There were worship services at the temple, but that was not its primary purpose. The Israelite tabernacle—and later Solomon’s temple—was where God dwelt among his people. He was in some way physically present in the most holy place, and because his holiness would destroy what was sinful, he had to be isolated from his people. This is what the tabernacle was for. It was an isolation chamber. Since God was there, that was where people came to sacrifice and worship. However, the worship service as we know it did not exist. There were sacrifices on the Sabbath, and in Solomon’s temple there was a choir that sang psalms. But there was no church building in which people met to worship, usually no sermon, no children’s story, no congregational singing. (Ezra 10:9 records the people’s distress at having to sit in the rain outside the temple while Ezra called them to repentance. Ezra agreed to postpone his sermon.) People were not required to come to the temple on the Sabbath. They were not even required to worship on the Sabbath or say certain prayers, so far as we know from the biblical text. They rested on the Sabbath in their own homes. I suspect the people devoted part of their time to prayer and thanksgiving, but it seems that few went to the temple to do that.⁶

⁵ See my “*The Christian & Rock Music: A Review-Essay*,” for more on why this is not a useful approach.

⁶ In the fourth commandment (Exod 20:8–11) God commands that the Sabbath be kept “holy,” but I think the Hebrew word *qodeš* should in this context be translated “separate” rather than “holy.” God does not command worship in this commandment, but a ceasing from work (the word Sabbath means “ceasing”). The opposite of work is not holiness, but not-working or separation from work, so “separate” seems more appropriate. The fourth commandment gives as a reason for this ceasing God resting from his work on the seventh day of creation (Gen 2:3) and blessing the day, not on his declaring it a day on which he is to be worshiped. The Sabbath is, thus, a blessed and God-mandated day of rest from week-day labor. It is also a wonderful time for God’s people to meet to praise him, but that is not the primary purpose of the day. This is supported by the fact that in the Torah God

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Today both *our bodies* and the believers *as a body* are the temple of God's Spirit (1 Cor 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16). Biblically, there is no other temple on earth for God's people today. Jesus says, "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matt 18:20). This is a staggering thought. It means the center of holiness is inside us, so we must do our best to keep ourselves holy and separate from things that defile us, not only on the Sabbath, but at all times, whether working or resting. We must try to be holy in thought, word, and deed. We must approach fellow believers reverently, because God is present inside them. It also means the church building has no special holiness of itself and need receive no special reverence. God is less present in an empty church than in two believers praising God together while working in a sewer. Thus, it is paradoxical to ask believers to leave "the sanctuary" if they want to chat, because when they leave the room they take the sanctuary with them.⁷

We have no biblical warrant for treating our place of meeting like the tabernacle was treated. This means the restrictions on the tabernacle may apply to us personally in some ways, but usually in a metaphorical way. (Thus we are counseled to offer ourselves as "living sacrifices" [Rom 12:1], even though we are sinful and physically blemished.) It also means, however, that they do not apply to the church building. This is fortunate. Those who turn to the Hebrew temple as a model for modern worship, using that to call for the highest level of music and the restriction of instruments, go only part way, when logically they should go the whole way (Gal 5:12). They should dispose of the organ and piano and use only cymbals, lyres, trumpets, and harps (2 Chron 5:12; 29:25–26). There should be no singing of hymns, but only psalms, and no congregational singing, but only singing by a choir—men only—wearing white linen dresses. Of course, the entire choir would also have to be from the tribe of Levi, and they would stand outside while singing, barefoot, even in winter. Indeed, if we feel ourselves bound to the musical methods of the temple, we ought also to return to offering sacrifices (Rom 2:17–26 is an especially appropriate warning for those who counsel this return to temple music).

never commands his people to gather together to worship on the Sabbath at the tabernacle in the generations to come, whereas he does command them to come to the tabernacle to celebrate several feasts.⁷

(This is not to say that when we meet in a place of worship we should do things that distract from our own worship of God or others' worship or threaten the unity of spirit God desires in his people when they worship him.) We may call the room where the church meets "the sanctuary," but that is merely our own coinage. God does not call it that in the Bible or hallow it. I do not mean to suggest that believers should not meet together. We are urged to do that (Heb 10:25), and the Sabbath is an excellent time to do it. If we choose to meet in what we call a church, in a building we have dedicated to God (even though he hasn't asked us to), and if we choose to have the order of service we have, that is fine, but that order of service is not ordained by God, and many a church service takes place where the "worship" is tepid or cooler. There is no virtue in gathering together to play dead.

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So is there, then, anything in the Bible that can guide us as we consider what music might be appropriate for God's people? There is. There are three texts that give us principles we can use. One is Phil 4:8:

Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

This text is more ambiguous than it seems at first. Does Paul counsel us to think only about things that meet all of these criteria? Is everything true lovely? Is everything lovely pure? How much praise is "any praise," and who is doing the praising? (Does "damning with faint praise" meet the requirement for "any praise"?) How can we do this consistently while also doing our daily work? Does everything in the Bible meet these criteria? I think the answers are suggested in v. 9: "And the God of peace will be with you." Paul is not making an explicit command here, but counseling us that if we think on these things, we will sense God's peace in us, and this will "guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (v. 7). That is to say, thinking on these things helps us maintain our relationship with God, keeps us faithful. Likewise, thinking about what is dishonest, unjust, impure, ugly—thinking about what is sinful—draws us away from God. If we apply this principle to song lyrics, we can easily determine whether we should listen to them or sing them. If we want to be more like God, if we want to experience God's blessings, we should limit our exposure to things that don't draw us closer to him. If you don't want to do that, what follows won't make much sense to you.

The second text that provides a useful principle is Col 3:16:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

This is not specifically referring to a church service, but in v. 15 Paul refers to the Colossians as "members of one body," which suggests a corporate application. Paul counsels the Colossians to fill themselves with the words of Christ (so seldom heard in churches today). He asks them to use "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (the distinction between these three is still debated) for three purposes: to teach each other, to admonish each other, and to sing to the Lord. Furthermore, he asks that singing to the Lord be done "with grace in your hearts." I take this to refer to a sense of God's presence, perhaps an upwelling of love and gratefulness leading to emotional expression in song.

The third principle I find in the prayer of Jesus in John 17:20–21:

I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

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Jesus was particularly concerned for the unity of his people. The divisions within Christendom make worldwide unity difficult, but even in the local congregation there are often divisions. When we allow them to continue, we keep Christ's prayer from being answered as he wished. Whatever music we ourselves prefer, we must keep in mind the unity of God's people. Maintaining that unity may call for compromise, for accepting what we ourselves don't much like, for not insisting on our own musical preferences if some are offended by them.

Whatever combination of words and music meets these criteria is fine for praising God, whether or not I like it. That doesn't mean it's necessarily appropriate in the church building during the worship service, where there is a need for unity and there may be many people who don't like it, but it's appropriate for those who like it, whether they be alone or in a group with similar tastes. Also, if any combination of words and music that meets these criteria proves itself able to touch the hearts of unbelievers, it can serve an evangelistic purpose, even though it might not be appropriate in an actual evangelistic campaign with a wide range of people attending.

Suggestions

The following suggestions are based on my belief that the most important thing in the world is establishing and maintaining a close, loving, and obedient relationship with God, what I call radical discipleship. This applies both on the personal level and in the church body. What neither strengthens nor weakens that relationship may be tolerated within measure, but is suspect. Whatever weakens that relationship is dangerous and to be avoided. Whatever strengthens that relationship is praiseworthy, even if I myself don't happen to like it. These suggestions are for those who agree with this belief. Those who don't believe a relationship with God is important won't be convinced.

I also believe that this relationship with God is not a figure of speech. Instead, its presence is felt, sensed. When we find the "fruits of the Spirit" (Gal 5:22) present in our lives, that is evidence of the relationship. True worship, whether individual or corporate, is different from the "going through the motions" so common in churches today. It fills us with joy, with love, with peace. It makes us feel kinship with other believers. Sometimes this may remind us of Wordsworth's nun, "breathless with adoration." At other times it may lead to ecstatic praise, choruses of amens. Not everyone feels it all the time or with a similar intensity, but when we feel it we feel God's presence. Whether silent or noisy, a church service without this sense of God's presence may be a church service without true worship. If we truly understand what God has done for us, how can we remain dry-eyed? My suggestions aim at producing and maintaining the sense of God's presence in the believer and the worship service.

Music for Personal Enjoyment

1. Apart from words, music is not of itself morally right or wrong, good or bad. However, music can affect the mind and the body in a variety of ways, and some of these effects can make it more difficult to walk with God.

Most music, if played loudly enough to hear it properly, has a physiological effect on people, and this physiological effect can in turn cause a psychological effect. Some music speeds up the heart rate and makes one want to march, tap one's feet, wave one's hand as if conducting, beat out a rhythm on the nearest available object, or even dance. This music may help one do repetitive tasks quickly. It can also make one feel happy. Other music calms the heart and stills the mind. This music may help one relax after a difficult day or accomplish a complex task one isn't eager to do, like writing a college paper or balancing the checkbook. An increased heart rate is seldom a health problem, especially for young people.

Almost any style of music can be used to convey a Christian message.⁸ There are some styles, however, where even without words the music is dark and menacing. Listeners feel increasingly depressed and desperate. I would suggest that Christians shouldn't listen to this, because these feelings are at odds with the good news of salvation.⁹ Likewise, musicians shouldn't try to connect such music with a Christian message. (Oddly, while this music is generally found in a tiny segment of rock music, there are also styles of "serious music" that have this effect. Some argue that this music is merely reflecting the anxiety of our times. This may well be, but Christians don't need that anxiety in their lives.)

We don't know what music David played for Saul when Saul was having mental problems, but people have long known that music can change moods and make people feel better. Today researchers know that vigorous singing or similar physical participation in music can release naturally occurring chemicals in the brain that ease pain or lead to a feeling of well-being. Such feelings are not in themselves spiritual, but when they accompany the spiritual they intensify it and encourage unity, joy, and care for others.

2. Christians should be very cautious about "secular music." A large percentage of the lyrics of such songs, no matter what the style, don't meet the standards outlined in Phil 4:8. It's not easy for Christians to keep their minds fixed on heavenly things. Any Christian music helps those who like it, but the lyrics of "secular music" generally don't.

⁸ I used to doubt that blues music—especially the Chicago blues style—could be used with Christian lyrics, but then I heard the Will Derryberry Band and realized it could be done.

⁹ There are rare exceptions—such as the "Dies Irae" section of Verdi's *Requiem*, where the music is dark and violent yet acceptable for Christians—in this case because it is portraying the wrath of God against sin on the day of judgment.

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This caution applies to the lyrics of any kind of “secular music.” Broadway showtunes, operatic arias, Celtic ballads, classical *lieder*, and country western songs are as likely to be problematic as rock music. If we want to walk with God as consistently and fruitfully as possible, we should simply not listen to music with lyrics that make us consider doing things Christians shouldn’t do. This needn’t be seen as a great sacrifice. The good effects outweigh what we give up. Also, just as for those who like meat but want to be vegetarians there are meat substitutes, there are Christian substitutes for all of these types of music. (Like meat substitutes, they may be less tasty than the real thing, but they are much better for you.)

I’ve often heard young people say, “I don’t listen to the lyrics, so they don’t harm me. I just like the music.” If that’s the case, however, why, when pressed, do they turn out to know the lyrics to great numbers of songs on the radio? The problem with these lyrics isn’t really that, say, listening to someone croon about the pleasures of illicit sex makes one want to go and do likewise (though it might). Listening to a song about killing cops doesn’t make most people want to kill cops. However, illicit sex and killing cops are not pure, virtuous, or praiseworthy. Songs about these acts will thus interfere with our experience of purity, virtue, and praiseworthiness, because they get into our minds and are difficult to get out.

Some lyrics don’t seem “all that bad.” For example, many pop songs are about love. What’s wrong with love? What’s wrong with a song where a boy sings “I’ll love you forever” to his girlfriend? Songs like this encourage romantic notions at tender ages and teach unrealistic ideas about love. If one hears them too often, one gets the idea that this kind of romance is a bigger part of life than it really is. Romance, like dessert, is good, but best in moderation. (Can listening to a great deal of CCM lead people to think that *God* should be a major part of their lives? Yes, of course! That’s part of its purpose!) Hearing these songs now and then in the shopping mall is not a major problem, but because they may not be true and virtuous, they get in the way of our walk with God. It really isn’t all that easy to maintain a walk with God day after day. Anything that can help is worth a try. Anything that doesn’t help should be reconsidered.

There are some lyrics that deal with human things rather than godly things, but are not impure. For example, some songs are about nature. Others are protests against oppression, reminding us of things that are unpleasant but true.¹⁰ Some songs are comic, and others tell stories. This music does little harm in moderation, apart from sometimes taking time that could be devoted to better

¹⁰ In the years before Bob Dylan and I gave our lives to God, his album *Street Legal* (1978, a year before his first Christian album), which I listened to over and over, kept raising a longing for God in my life. Whether or not he knew it at the time, his songs were crying out for salvation (“Is there anybody listening, Señor?” “Will you tell me what the answer is, Señor?”), and they had the same effect on me. Last summer I listened to them again, after not hearing them for years, and I was moved to tears as I sensed the Holy Spirit chasing Dylan like Francis Thompson’s Hound of Heaven.

things. Of course, it won't do to listen for these songs on the radio, because one doesn't know when they will come on.

3. Music videos and MTV are nearly always more problematic for the Christian than the songs alone. They demand more attention than the songs alone, they glorify the performers beyond their musicianship, they often introduce themes of sex or violence not present in the songs themselves, and because they are often lip-synched, they seem insincere. The primary exception is some videos of concerts. Even Christian music videos move the focus from the song to the performer, degrading the spiritual message.

If the purpose of CCM is to turn the hearts of listeners to God, as claimed, we do well to notice that Christian music videos turn the attention to the performer. There is a natural interest in seeing what performers look like, how they play. This is part of why people go to concerts rather than merely listening to CDs—no matter what the style of music. This in itself isn't a problem, because the concert doesn't last long. (The performers share the limelight with God for an hour, then retreat into the background.) Similarly, watching a video of a concert isn't much of a problem. When a song is turned into an MTV style music video, however, a script writer and director take over—often not themselves Christians—and they may change a song's focus as they use their unsanctified imaginations to make a song more entertaining. This doesn't mean young people shouldn't watch Christian music videos, but that they should be cautious and not make them part of their daily diet.

However, Christians would do well to not watch non-Christian music videos at all. Such a large proportion of the videos on MTV are impure in some way that one might as well be watching the "hot" scenes from R rated movies.¹¹ The popularity of MTV with many young people suggests that watching music videos can become almost compulsive behavior. Experience and reason quickly reveal that it is very difficult to maintain one's focus on God while watching these videos.¹² Many music videos cost as much to make as advertisements and

¹¹ A few weeks ago I walked into Best Buy to purchase an ink cartridge for my printer and was accosted by a twenty foot wide bank of television screens hooked up to work as one huge screen. On the screens was a music video of pop singer Britney Spears. Her nearly naked torso could be seen from across the store. As she lip-synched her song she caressed her flesh and offered each body part to the camera as to a lover. When I was close enough to hear the words, I was surprised to find that she was singing a relatively inoffensive love song. The video portion of the performance said something quite different from the lyrics, however. An hour spent watching music videos on MTV will reveal many similar examples.

¹² Let's be fair. It's also hard to maintain one's focus on God while watching the evening news, or sports, or just about any television program. There is very little in the news that is pure, lovely, or indeed entirely true—television news is a wallow in filth garbed in the supposedly hallowed robes of relevance and importance, interspersed with frequent appeals to sensual gratification and worship of worldliness (called advertising). By contrast, some Christian television can help us

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much more, minute for minute, than most movies. The reason is that video directors try to make them as compelling as possible, hoping to keep viewers watching. Unfortunately, sex and violence draw our attention, so they are emphasized in videos.

4. Each style of music has its own criteria for excellence of composition and performance. We can't fairly judge one style by the criteria for another style. Other things being equal, excellence is preferable to mediocrity, because excellence comes closer to the creative perfection of God.

We don't complain that the leopard is inadequate because it doesn't have stripes like a tiger. We don't think less of the chicken because it doesn't bark like a dog. Similarly, we need to judge Christian music, whatever its style, according to the conventions of that style. Some university-trained professional musicians believe the only appropriate music for worship is "serious music," and the highly trained operatic voice is most suitable for the gospel (despite the fact that it is sometimes difficult to understand the words).¹³ This is simply not true.

As I write, the Winter Olympic games at Salt Lake City have just ended. What if the judges in the figure skating competitions marked skaters down because of insufficient speed? What if the judges in the speed skating competitions marked down speed skaters because they didn't leap into the air and spin? Yet within each competition excellence can be judged (though, as with music, there is a necessary subjectiveness to this judging).

Similarly, we can easily determine whether classical music is well-performed, but if we judge it according to the conventions of bluegrass music, the best of it will fall far short. That doesn't mean bluegrass music is better than classical music. It simply means it's a different style. If we judge Christian rock according to whether it is as melodically and harmonically complex as some classical music, it will of course fall short, but that isn't what it intends to do, nor are the criteria of classical music divinely revealed. There is a substantial joy to be gained from what is melodically and harmonically simple, as well as from what is complex. Many of us who play instruments can only play what is simple, and if only what is complex is praiseworthy, then we won't be able to play. Yet even what is simple can praise God.

In singing as well, the criteria for excellence vary with the style. In country-western vocals a southern accent is expected, and a little sob or yodel in the voice is appreciated. In bluegrass a bit more twang in the voice is appropriate.

keep our eyes on God, much as CCM does—though some is sensationalistic or theologically suspect, and the frequent request for donations is appalling (see Acts 8:18–24).

¹³ For example, Calvin M. Johansson's chapters in *The Christian & Rock Music*. See my review for a refutation of his elitist ideas about music and worship.

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White blues singers are expected to sing with black accents.¹⁴ In opera, the voice is an instrument of beauty rather than communication. In the Broadway musical, on the other hand, singers are supposed to have interesting voices, rather than beautiful voices. Rhythm and blues singers these days have developed their own ways of replacing held notes with little scales. Black gospel uses some similar techniques in singing, but white gospel needs a plainer voice, preferably with some sort of Appalachian accent. Jazz singers have to croon with beautiful voices, but their sense of rhythm is far different from that of opera singers. An operatic voice may at its best be the acme of human vocal achievement, but it sounds ludicrous, wildly inappropriate, with rock music. It also sounds out of place with praise songs.

Each of these vocal types can be very pleasant to listen to. Each can appropriately communicate the Christian message. We can't fairly denigrate one appropriate style of singing because it isn't another appropriate style of singing. However, within a single style of music, we can fairly judge the relative merits of voices. Some have a more pleasing sound, greater range, more accurate intonation. We can fairly prefer excellence to mediocrity, and we can train performers. Nevertheless, we need to bear in mind that there are many singers whose voices are nothing special, yet have a gift for conveying spiritual things in music.

I'm not saying that it's as difficult to sing folk music as it is to sing opera, or that some country blues tune is equal in compositional complexity and excellence to a Brahms symphony. I am saying that each has its own criteria for quality, even if some styles require more training than others. God can be praised in every style. What's more, the God who loves and heals sinners and prefers the poor in spirit to the proud must certainly take at least as much delight in hearing the screechiest six-year-old violinist who loves him with all her heart as in hearing the pure notes of the professional who receives a check and who only shows up when she's performing (though I'd rather listen to the professional). There is room for *all* creatures of our God and King to praise him.

5. Spiritual, emotional, and intellectual sincerity and authenticity are valid criteria for judging music and lyrics. Quality of composition and performance in any style of music cannot make up for lack of evident sincerity. In worship, excellence without sincerity borders on blasphemy.

It's been said, "You've got to suffer if you want to sing the blues,"¹⁵ and this has an application to other styles of music, too. We should, perhaps, be dis-

¹⁴ If that sounds silly, it is less so than rhythmically-challenged white choirs struggling to sing Negro spirituals.

¹⁵ This is one reason why the Negro spiritual is not usually the best choice for a choir of white college students. They may enjoy the song, but in their mouths it loses the integrity it once had, because the dialect is not their own. Those interested in the background of this type of music should read Thomas Wentworth Higginson's groundbreaking article "Negro Spirituals," published in the

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turbed to hear people sing “Redeemed, How I Love to Proclaim It” when they haven’t been born again and don’t love to proclaim their relationship with God. Jesus was more pleased by the widow who gave her last two mites than with the trumpeted charity of the rich. I think he would be more pleased by the creaky-voiced grandmother who breaks down in tears while singing “Jesus Paid it All” than by the opera singer who can sing “Agnus Dei” in a piercingly beautiful voice but has never surrendered herself to the Lamb of God.

Even those who walk with God can’t sing all songs with sincerity. A song about being lifted up from the gutter is not convincing from the mouth of someone who has never turned away from God. Canned music is inherently lacking in sincerity, so singing to a taped accompaniment during the worship service is not generally the best way to bring people to God (I’ve heard it called “sacred karaoke”). Some Christian songs strike me as less heartfelt than others. Some seem less than authentic and more like attempts to make money or tug on emotional heartstrings (sentimentalism). As a child of the late 60s and early 70s, back when authenticity and sincerity were considered important virtues, I have a special respect for performers who write their own songs, even if their voices and playing are less than superb. I don’t mean to say that performers should write their own songs for worship, but I do think believability should be on the list of criteria when we judge a performance.

6. Some Christian lyrics contain theological errors. This is not a large problem for the spiritually mature, but it can confuse those who are not biblically literate. Thus, we should consider whether the pleasure we gain from a song outweighs the potential harm of biblically inaccurate lyrics.

Few Christian songwriters are theologians. Most of them reflect what they’ve read, what music they’ve heard, and what their pastors say. Thus, it’s not surprising that some songs have lyrics that reveal a misunderstanding of the Bible. This is perhaps least likely with praise songs drawn straight from the Bible and with the great 18th century hymns written by poets who were theologically sophisticated.¹⁶ It is more of a problem with Negro spirituals and black and white southern gospel. I’m very fond of many of these songs, and I don’t mean that we shouldn’t use them, especially since they can be very effective at bringing unity to a group of believers. I am saying simply that some really have very little scriptural support, and we might do better to prefer the sounder ones.

“Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” is a delightful song, fun to sing if it swings a little, but those who don’t realize how it draws on the Elijah story and uses symbols to represent actual events might come to expect Christ to carry them away in a chariot. I’ve long been puzzled by the popular white gospel song “Great

June 1867 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, but available on-line at several sites, such as <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/TWH/Higg.html>.

¹⁶ Though indeed these hymns are often rewritten or have problematic verses left out.

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Speckled Bird.” Guy Smith writes, in the final stanza, “When Christ cometh descending from heaven / With the clouds as He writes in His Word / I’ll be joyfully carried to meet Him / On the wings of the great speckled bird.” I’ve been told that Smith somehow saw the church as a great speckled bird, for some reason, but the connection puzzles me. “I’ll Fly Away” is another gospel tune that is less than biblically accurate. I’ve heard “Ave Maria” sung in Protestant worship services several times, but while I love the melody, I disagree with the sentiment expressed.

Music for Group Worship

7. Music is not of itself sacred or secular, whatever its style. Classical and sacred are not synonymous. Quality of composition or performance does not make music without words suitable for the worship service. When instrumental music calls to mind sacred lyrics, it can lead to worship, though generally less efficiently than music with words. At best, from a spiritual viewpoint, music without words in the worship service provides a background for meditation. However, many listeners don’t make use of this opportunity.

Some people assume that any classical music is appropriate in the worship service because it has no words and its beauty and excellence praise God. However, while such music may be so beautiful that it makes us thank God, we are more likely to simply enjoy it because it is beautiful, with no conscious thought of God. It may be edifying to the intellect and the emotions, but it is not spiritually edifying. At best, it provides a pleasant background to the Spirit’s working on the heart during meditation, should we choose to meditate. More often it holds our attention and keeps us from such meditation.

There are times when instrumental music might provide a background for whatever else is going on, such as before the worship service begins or after it ends. However, if it calls to mind spiritual lyrics familiar to most people in the audience, it will have more spiritual impact. Thus, playing hymns on the organ may do more to bring the congregation to God than playing a Bach fugue, even though the fugue was dedicated to God’s glory and exhibits a greater technical excellence.

Our primary concern as we consider what music to use in the worship service should be its effect on the worshipers. Does it bring them to a unity of spirit? Does it make them more receptive to the work of the Holy Spirit? Does it help convince them of their need of a savior, remind them there’s power in the blood, encourage them to be like Jesus, inspire them to praise God with their whole heart? Meditative organ music may prepare some people to quietly receive the Holy Spirit, but it does little to make a group of people feel “of one accord,” and there are more effective ways of ushering in the Spirit, such as singing hymns with heartfelt sincerity.

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Outside the worship service, instrumental music is less of a problem. Listening to classical music is a spiritually neutral occupation, in general, though it has physiological and psychological effects that have a bearing on our spiritual focus. Some “serious music” is disturbing, but most isn’t. It can make a pleasant background for daily life. However, songs with Christian lyrics, performed in a style we appreciate, do much more to keep us close to God, whatever their level of excellence.

8. Any style of music can entertain. Entertainment is not in itself wrong, in its place, but the worship service is not the place for entertainment, because the more we are being entertained, the less we are worshipping. Thus, the worship service will be more spiritually profitable if we avoid music that entertains. “Special music” in the worship service can sometimes provide an opportunity for meditation or allow God to speak to the listener, but primarily, I believe, it entertains the congregation, despite the performers’ desire to give glory to God.

Some condemn certain kinds of CCM because they are entertaining, but any time performers perform and people watch rather than participating, the watchers are being entertained, even when that music is “serious.” The performer may be praising God, and some of those listening may be praising God as a result of the performance, but the fact remains that the primary purpose of “special music” is providing a special treat for the listeners, which is to say, entertainment. Watching someone else worship is not in itself worship.¹⁷

In 1 Cor 14:26, Paul tells us something about how worship sometimes occurred in New Testament times. He writes, “What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation.” This verse is less clear than it seems, but I take it to mean that in Corinth (a church with every problem in the book, though also with good qualities), everyone liked to have a part in the worship service. I suspect that ideally they would take turns rising and sharing. It was a sort of spiri-

¹⁷ Of course, it’s possible to worship while watching or listening. It’s simply not the *most effective* way of achieving unity in worship. I recently took my sons, ages eleven and thirteen, to their first CCM concert, one they very much wanted to see: Jennifer Knapp and her band and Jars of Clay. These are among the most talented CCM performers. In concert, however, the music was deafening, the sound systems rather crude, and I could rarely understand a word the vocalists sang, though my sons were enthralled. I was impressed by the clean-cut modesty of the some five thousand young people in attendance, and the lack of smoke, alcohol, and drugs (very much present at concerts in my rock ‘n’ roll days). What most impressed me, however, was looking around at those sitting or standing near me. As the music roared about us, hundreds of these teenagers and college students had their eyes closed and their faces and hands lifted up to God. They knew every word, and they were singing along with the bands, but where the bands were entertaining, these young people were worshipping. Indeed, I might even say they were completely immersed in worship and communion with God. Frankly, I was jealous. If I saw more of that during special music or organ preludes when the church gathers to worship, my comments would be less pejorative.

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tual amateur hour. Paul doesn't condemn this, and it shouldn't be seen as entertainment, though it could degenerate into prideful performance if not controlled. I see it more as a sort of testimony service, with everyone edified by hearing what God was doing in the lives of their brothers and sisters. Paul then provides the principle on which to rate these things: "Let all things be done for building up." I think that means that we should evaluate everything in our worship service by whether or not it helps people draw closer to God and stay closer to God.

I place "special music" in quotes because often it's not very special, and if it is scheduled every week it's doubly not special. I think I would feel better about it if the singer sang from the congregation rather than from the platform, so there would be less emphasis on the performer. The hand-held microphones and seemingly calculated poses and gestures I often see during the worship service seem more like entertainment than worship.¹⁸ Perhaps performers would do well to ask themselves, "Is this my individual worship, regardless of anyone else who may be listening? Am I trying to lift the other worshipers to God by sharing with them a song that will edify them? or am I really trying to please them, entertain them, or elicit their praise?"¹⁹

When one listens to music in the car or the home, entertainment is not out of place, but there are various types of entertainment. Being entertained by mu-

¹⁸ Some will ask, at this point, "What about applause during the worship service?" I know the argument that we aren't applauding the performer, but the message, or God, but the fact is that we don't applaud God after we sing a congregational hymn well. Thus, whatever we may pretend, applause after "special music" is nearly always performer focused, and so questionable. I don't get applause after I preach a terrific sermon, so why should we applaud a musician during the worship service? In actuality, we applaud during the worship service because we are used to applauding at secular performances, but in so doing we make it clear that "special music" is more entertainment than worship. I have no problem with applauding a Christian entertainer performing at a concert, even if that concert is in the room where the church meets to worship, because a Christian concert may praise God and may lead people to him, but it is not communal worship. Concerts often bring people into unity, but their purpose is not congregational unity as an essential element of corporate worship. However, I think applause during the worship service is a sign that we need to rethink whether worship should entertain us or be something we do together. (Similarly, I cringe at the trend these days for pastors to say, "Let's give God a big hand of applause." If God has done some mighty act, we'd do much better to spontaneously begin singing the Doxology.) Experience shows us that God doesn't strike us dead or send fire from heaven to destroy us if we applaud during the worship service. If I were a pastor, I don't think eliminating such applause would be high on my agenda, because the church will not begin worshipping "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24) merely because it no longer applauds performers. This would be about as effective as a plastic surgeon bestowing youth and beauty by doing a nose job on an eighty year old person who weighs four hundred pounds. The Body of Christ needs a much more substantial makeover before true worship will happen every time it meets.

¹⁹ I recall a few years ago hearing one of my students tell about singing in church the previous week. Her singing rival had walked into the service wearing a big white hat in the midst of my student's performance (her choice of word). "I know she was just trying to draw the attention away from me," my student said. Her moment in the spotlight was ruined. But standing in the spotlight is not the purpose of worship.

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sic in private even as one is lifted to God by it is quite acceptable. As I've explained above, music videos have so much entertainment that the edification can be missed, but this problem needn't happen with music one hears. Some time with God is better than other time with God, but any time with God is better than no time with God.

9. Everything in the worship service should encourage an intense unity of the believers, a unity of thought, feeling, and worship, preparing believers to receive God's word to them. Any element of the service that lowers congregational fervor or detracts from congregational unity should be changed or deleted.²⁰ Silence should not be equated with true reverence or worship (though true worship is sometimes silent, of course).

I admit that this is an unusual position. However, what most concerned Jesus as he prayed in John 17 was the unity of the believers. Three times Jesus commanded, "Love one another" (John 13:34; 15:12, 17). I assume he meant it. It seems to me that we praise and worship God best when we do it from a position of loving unity. When we are filled with love for each other, when we come to feel open to each other, concerned about each other, connected to each other, then, I think, we can feel the Holy Spirit descend upon us, whether we be silent or singing, and then true worship begins. I have sat in worship services hundreds of times where I've felt that little worship is going on because there is no connection. I've sat in services in the same rooms that were foretastes of heaven, with God's presence very near.²¹

It's harder to reach this unity in a large church than in a small church, and it's harder to reach it in a nearly empty church than in a full church. The unity

²⁰ The ideal worship service is analogous to a nuclear chain reaction. The aim is producing energy to motivate Christian devotion, worship, service, and evangelism, but too much energy at once can lead to a catastrophic explosion or meltdown. In one sort of nuclear reactor, if the control rods are in all the way, the radioactive rods are insulated from each other, and nothing happens, no power is generated. As the control rods are withdrawn, the energy generated increases. Various aspects of the traditional worship service act as control rods, limiting the production of spiritual energy. The best worship leaders know how to pull out or push in the rods to maintain maximum useful spiritual energy while avoiding an explosion into emotional chaos. Some congregations explode every week, with members falling to the floor, shouting, or leaping around the room laughing. This is problematic. Other congregations are so nervous about the energy that they produce little or none. This is a waste of time and effort. However, as in a nuclear power station, the purpose of God's people meeting together in worship should be power generation. True worship results in power generation. When radioactive rods are exposed to each other, they work as one, and the resulting energy is exponential. Similarly, when God's people become one as they worship, they transcend the world and enter into God's presence.

²¹ In my own life, I experience this most often at campmeeting. The evening meetings are often held in the same room where I worship every week, but the people are different. Those who come to spend a whole week at campmeeting are eager to receive a blessing, they are confident that it will happen, and it does. (What a treat to speak to groups like this.) Too often, those who sit there once a week are there because it's the right or required thing to do. This isn't really worship.

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can sometimes be faked if people sing loud enough, but there is a true unity that transcends volume. Unity is very difficult to achieve when a congregation sits in pews looking at the back of the heads of the people in front of them. Unity can be more easily achieved by merely angling the pews, so it's easier to turn one's head and see and hear the other worshippers. Then one feels less alone. Better yet is people sitting in a circle, and even better people sitting at home in a living room, praising God together.

I believe that everything in the worship service needs to be subordinate to the goal of worshiping God in unity. If the organ prelude or the special music lower the spiritual temperature by drawing people away from each other and focusing on a private experience of God, replace them with congregational hymns. If taking up the offering distracts people from God, collect it earlier or later. If the verse or two that far too often passes for a Scripture reading and the "morning prayer" don't inflame the congregation, then replace them with a season of prayer and Bible quoting and singing that lasts an hour, rippling back and forth across the congregation and gathering the worshippers together as a harvester gathers wheat into sheaves. Then, when the church is *one* as the Father and the Son are *one* (John 17:11), when the church has joyfully and tearfully praised God as one and lifted up each other to God, let God the gracious king respond to his people, guiding them and training them, admonishing and comforting, through the person of his ambassador, the pastor. I long for this. I believe God longs for this.

Some might say I am mistaking manufactured emotions for genuine worship, or that I am trying to conjure up the Spirit. I don't think so. Consider the difference between watching your favorite football game while sitting in the stadium and watching it at home with the television's sound turned down low. You can see better at home, but you entirely miss the physiological and psychological transformation that comes from being with 50,000 people who are loudly of one accord. Imagine what would happen if you invited a dozen people to your home, then made them sit in rows in your living room, with no eye contact. Would that increase the feeling of caring friendship? Recall the difference between visiting with a dear friend face to face and visiting by telephone. I remember, a generation ago, talking on a pay phone in England to my fiancée in California, once a week, for ten minutes (all I could afford). The experience was more frustrating than fulfilling. That's the way what passes for worship often seems to me.²² It can be both disconcerting and disheartening to look at people in the church service and see profound boredom on their faces.

²² Not always, though. Last week the room was packed, the hymns sung with vigor, and we sang one of my favorites, "For All the Saints." I couldn't sing the last verse. I was too choked up and overwhelmed by the ocean-roar of voices describing what I most long for: "From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast, / Through gates of pearl streams in the countless host, / Singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost: / Alleluia, Alleluia!" That's worship! That's what I'm pleading for!

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Perhaps I simply have a harder time letting go of myself than do most people, but I believe there is a large core of thoughtful people who are deeply unhappy with the worship service, who like me are starving for a sense of holy community, of being “one in the Spirit,” as the song claims, of not only being acquainted with each other but of loving each other. Some are young, and some are older. If to obey is truly better than sacrifice, we should obey our Lord and love one another. Music, used rightly, is one of the most effective ways of reaching this state. If young people were accustomed to reaching it every week by singing the great old hymns, they would be less interested in trying other musical styles that might help them reach it.

I think we should choose music for the worship service according to its effectiveness in moving us to this blessed state. I don’t think instrumental music does this effectively. It can be done with the great old hymns, with praise songs, with black gospel and white gospel, even with the accompaniment of a rock band, so long as the worshipers aren’t offended by the music. A congregation that doesn’t know or like the old hymns I love might want to try something else (though there is much to be said for training people during afternoon hymn sings).²³ A congregation that gags at drums and electric guitars can usually compromise on other types of music. I suspect, though, that if the congregation is really intent on entering into worship, any of these styles of music will work.

10. Congregational singing is the only music encouraged in the New Testament for group worship.²⁴ Vigorous congregational singing has potent physiological, mental, and spiritual effects. When vigorous congregational singing continues for some time, it encourages a feeling of unity among the singers. Vigorous congregational singing is our fullest expression of corporate worship.

The fact that select choirs or instrumental music are not encouraged in the New Testament doesn’t necessarily mean they shouldn’t be used in worship services, but does suggest that they should not be seen as preferable to congregational singing.

When we sing vigorously, we breath deeper and we exercise our chest, back, and abdominal muscles. This floods our cells with extra oxygen, making us feel alert, strong, and energetic. It also releases naturally-occurring sub-

²³ One of the most memorable evenings of my life was spent in a hymn-sing led by a man who knew how to lead singing (Charles L. Brooks, an editor of the hymnal I use) and a pianist who knew how to accompany hymn-singing (his daughter). The leader took us through dozens of songs, helping us learn how to sing, how to understand the songs, how to enjoy them. As he moved us from anthems of praise to quiet songs of contrition and surrender and back again, as he gauged and controlled our enthusiasm, we coalesced. I began with a migraine headache. I ended feeling wonderful. This was my introduction, fifteen years ago, to the glory of hymns and the physiological effects they can have.

²⁴ The heavenly choirs of the redeemed seem to include everyone, so they are less choir than congregation. The instruments they play seem to be for accompaniment.

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stances in our brains that relax us, decrease sensitivity to pain, give us a feeling of well-being, encourage a feeling of compassion for others, and lower our inhibitions slightly (making it easier for us to respond to the work of the Holy Spirit on our hearts). Meanwhile, the lyrics of songs build our faith, urge us to witness, and help us praise God.

In most worship services there is very little truly corporate worship, with the entire congregation worshipping out loud at the same time. Too often what is called worship is essentially a spectator sport. We listen to a Scripture reading, a prayer, a call for the offering, perhaps a children's story, "special music," a sermon, a benediction. We can do this without being involved, with our mind focused on other things. When the congregation sings, however, it can sing together.

Most hymns should be sung vigorously, faster and with a stronger emphasis on the beat than is generally done. However, once the congregation is warmed up, the blood flowing, there are slower songs that can have a potent spiritual effect. When hymns are sung more slowly, there is time for people to sing harmony. Singing *a cappella* is especially conducive to singing harmony, and when we sing harmony we have to sing together. (Singing in harmony depends on having a bit of training, but it doesn't require that one sing the notes in the hymnal. There are other good harmonies to be sounded out. The harmonies used in the shape note tradition of *The Sacred Harp* seem discordant to many ears, but they soon come to sound beautiful, and they have spiritual power. I'd love to see congregations taught to sing *a cappella* from *The Sacred Harp*.)

Vigorous singing, however, does not necessarily mean spiritual singing. Sometimes it is simply vigorous, with no sense of the Spirit, and in that case it's primarily good exercise. Some of the most spiritual singing I've experienced has been among people gathered for the Lord's Supper, their hearts prepared, spontaneously singing such slow songs as "Just As I Am," "I Surrender All," and "Amazing Grace."

11. Tepid congregational singing is false worship, a mockery of worship. It says, in effect, "God hasn't done much for me and doesn't really deserve my worship."

Tepidness in singing often reflects spiritual lukewarmness, though not necessarily. Whether lukewarm or simply quiet, the physiological, psychological, and spiritual benefits of whole-hearted congregational singing simply aren't experienced by those who don't join in. This means they receive less personal benefit from the worship service. It also means they have less to offer to others and to God. Those who don't sing vigorously with heart and voice miss out on much of the feeling of unity available to those who sing together. There are some, it is true, who are so tone deaf or otherwise impaired that they disrupt the service if they sing. This is a disability, and people with disabilities need special

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care and extra support and understanding. It is sometimes possible to find some other way to include them in the worship experience.²⁵

It is up to the leaders of the worship service to encourage vigorous congregational singing. This can be done by explaining how singing affects people. It can also be encouraged by having talented song leaders.²⁶ I have often heard organists kill congregational unity by playing hymns too slow or even too fast. This decreases unity by frustrating the singers. When organists fail to keep regular time, extending notes longer than the music on the page shows, they can also throw off the congregation. (True, there are some songs where congregations are accustomed to extending certain notes, and in this case not extending them can cause confusion. However, singing songs slowly and extending notes works best with *a cappella* singing.) Some organists like to include “reharmonizations” when they play hymns. This is often very impressive, and it can lead the congregation to greater enthusiasm, but if the reharmonization is too discordant or loses track of the melody, the audience can be confused. If the organist plays too quietly, people sing less vigorously, and this is not desirable. However, if the organist plays too loudly, it can be difficult to hear one’s own voice, and this too is a problem.²⁷

²⁵ I’ve mentioned that while I can’t yet bring myself to sing praise songs, I enjoy accompanying them on the guitar. Music therapists working in nursing homes have found that people who can’t carry a tune can often carry a rhythm with a tambourine or rhythm sticks, and so be included. On the other hand, I’ve often been dismayed when a congregation begins clapping along with a song—not because the clapping is necessarily inappropriate, but because they generally clap out of time. (Being rhythmically challenged seems to be a specifically Caucasian disability, though not all Caucasians suffer from it. I have never seen found this disability in African-American churches. Actually, people of any background who listen to a lot of popular music often have a better sense of rhythm than many church-goers.) Perhaps the tone deaf could provide a steady monotone drone or hum, rather like the drone of a bagpipe or dulcimer (this suggestion is partially tongue in cheek).

²⁶ Leading songs effectively in worship requires not only some musical training and enthusiasm, but spiritual maturity and an ability to sense the congregation’s spiritual and emotional needs and choose music and make comments that fill them.

²⁷ *Christianity Today* columnist Andy Crouch makes some interesting comments on musical volume in article “Amplified Versions” (22 April 2002: 86), though he is dealing with a serious problem with what I call “rock ‘n’ roll church,” rather than with overly-loud organs. He writes, “At its best, amplified music is to sound what a cathedral is to stone; an expression of the timeless longing to build something greater than ourselves, pointing to Someone greater still.

“But I am troubled by many amplified worship services. Next time you’re in one of these settings, watch and listen to the congregation. Get ready for the sound of silence. If the sheer volume of amplified worship is like a sonic cathedral, it can also trump the most forbidding medieval liturgy in its capacity to stun churchgoers into a passive stupor. . . . In the face of amplified worship, most congregations don’t do much more than clap, close their eyes, and sway a little. . . . When you can’t hear yourself singing, why even try.”

I don’t have enough experience with this kind of church service to judge whether the problem is as common as he claims. I suspect many worship leaders would think he is exaggerating. However, I think he is right to the extent that whether the high decibels come from an organ or a band, if they discourage unified participation, limiting participants to those with microphones and instruments and talent, they both squelch true worship and set up what Crouch calls “a new priesthood . . .

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Tepid singing is not only a problem with hymns. I attend a church that has about two hundred teenagers in the pews. We often sing praise songs in church, and we do it because that's supposed to be what the teenagers like. Yet often the teenagers sing them with no more enthusiasm than the older people exhibit (not much). This makes me wonder why we bother. The interesting thing is that I've also heard the same group of teenagers sing the same songs in the same room when there are few adults around. Then they sing with enthusiasm and with pleasure, and with about four times the volume. I'm not sure why this is—it seems almost as if they're trying to punish the adults for making them come to church. What I do know is that teenagers who want livelier worship services should take the first step by singing as if they were alive.

12. Vigorous congregational singing is always appropriate during the worship service, and many musical styles are acceptable for such worship, so long as those present are not offended. Music that offends some in the congregation is not acceptable, because it destroys the unity of the body of Christ.

When young people complain about singing “the old hymns,” it is usually, I think, because they associate them with the dismal, joyless singing they are used to singing in church, singing they rightly recognize as a sort of blasphemy. Thus, the pressure for new music in the worship service is primarily the fault of those who didn't sing the old hymns with fervor. The good news is that it's not too late to teach tepid singers to sing vigorously, and it's not too late to show young people that the old hymns, properly sung, are wonderfully fulfilling and too great to be neglected.

Should there be a place in the worship service for music written by people who are still alive? Yes, there should. We should keep in mind, however, that singing contemporary Christian music in worship is not a guarantee of great singing and spiritual unity. Those who sing hymns tepidly are quite capable of doing the same with contemporary songs. I have often seen praise songs slaughtered by pianists or organists who despise the songs and seem to deliberately mangle the tempo or the beat.²⁸

The primary determinant of the appropriateness of music for worship (apart from the lyrics) should be whether or not the audience is offended. This calls for compromise—not a compromise of principles, but a willingness to put the needs

the amplified people [who] do for us what we cannot do for ourselves: make music, offer prayers, approach the unapproachable.” True worship should come from brothers and sisters coming together in unity (Ps 133:1).

²⁸ Perhaps I am being unfair. There are many highly trained musicians with a classical background who are simply rhythm-deficient when it comes to syncopation. I recently heard a talented classical violinist accompany on the bongos a bell choir playing a lovely Caribbean tune. He hit every note exactly as the sheet music specified, but half a beat slower than the Caribbean style of the song called for.

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of others before our own needs. I do *not* mean by this only that older people need to loosen up and let young people do what they want. I also mean that younger people need to learn to appreciate what the older people enjoy. Young people need to be willing to learn to love the old songs if they expect the older people to learn to like the newer songs. This surrender of self for the good of others is at the heart of the Christian ideal.

If a congregation can achieve unity and praise God with their hearts while a rock band accompanies the singing, then God accepts that worship with joy, I think. If a congregation is simply entertained by the band, however, and doesn't achieve unity or sense a connection with God, then something is wrong, and the worship team needs to reconsider their approach. If some in the congregation can't bear the music, then the music is destroying the unity of the Body of Christ.

The same warnings go for singing praise songs during the worship service. They also apply to singing traditional hymns. Where offence is given, there is a need for either change or education. Perhaps we need a sort of worship rating system based on the movie rating system. Then, people offended by a certain kind of music could avoid services where it is found.

13. Some Christian songs are appropriate for outside the worship service, yet not for congregational singing. Songs for congregational singing should praise God in some way or teach and admonish the congregation. They should have lyrics that are fitting for many people to sing at once, rather than focusing on individual experience. Their tunes should also be melodic, as this makes them easier to sing and remember.

A large percentage of CCM has lyrics more suitable for personal than corporate singing. Many musicians write about their search for God, their struggle to maintain their relationship with God, their doubts and fears, their attempts (often failed) to do what Jesus would do. Sometimes they write about relationships with other people, loneliness, longing, love of nature, work, marriage, parenting, with little if any explicit Christian content. These are legitimate topics that deserve exploration by Christians. The lyricists are often dealing with problems faced by many in their audience. When we hear others sing about our problems, we gain strength, even if we aren't always presented with the gospel as an answer to the problems. However, these songs simply don't work very well in corporate worship. The expected pronoun for corporate worship is "we." When "I" occurs too often, it can come to sound self-centered rather than God-centered or Body of Christ-centered.²⁹ (I don't agree with those who say we

²⁹ This is part of why I don't like to sing that favorite hymn, "In the Garden." It's too personal (and, of course, sappy). Even a song like "How Great Thou Art," though not sappy, might be better with less of "I" and "my" and more of "we" and "our."

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shouldn't sing praise songs because the word "I" occurs too often, though we might do well to consider the focus of songs as we choose what to sing.)

For corporate worship we do better to sing songs expressing corporate praise, corporate supplication, corporate needs, corporate faith, corporate hope, whatever the music that accompanies the lyrics.

Praise songs often have simple melodies, but they are singable melodies. Most hymns have singable melodies.³⁰ One problem I've noticed with transferring rock-type or folk-type CCM to the worship setting is that the melody is sometimes minimal, hovering around one note and seldom going more than a step above or below it. For example, the Jars of Clay song "Flood," though it has a powerful message, works well as a song played and sung by a band, and was a big hit, has a melody with about four notes, and much of the chorus uses only two notes. I've heard groups of people try to sing this, but it simply doesn't work. In the head the song is fine, but there's no melody worth whistling aloud, and it's difficult for a congregation to sing a song that alternates between two notes and doesn't regularly reach a melodic resolution. What sounds good in a band with one singer sounds like a monotone drone sung by a congregation. When choosing music, we need to consider not only message but melody, whatever the musical style may be.

Conclusion

While I myself much prefer the great old hymns, I would strongly urge those who agree with me to bear in mind that our most important duty is to bring people to Christ, rather than turning them away from Christ. We have a special duty to bring our children to God, rather than alienating them. We should be willing to sacrifice our own tastes in order to keep our children with us, and we should make certain that what we assume to be our principles are not in fact merely our tastes.

Musical style is a matter of taste, not right or wrong, but because above all the church needs to be unified, we need to be ready to compromise our own preferences for the sake of the Body of Christ. We do better to train people than force people. If the church can't agree on music, it is better to split a church physically into separate congregations than to split it spiritually by imposing the tastes of one faction on another.

Because congregational worship isn't true worship unless the congregation worships as one, and because congregational singing not only helps us achieve that unity but is the primary way in which the church worships at one time, we need to devote more time to learning how to sing together, and we need to devote more time to singing together. We need to surrender ourselves to the good

³⁰ The hymn book I use is full of very singable hymns, though some of the songs are trite (and some of the modern hymns included are only marginally spiritual). However, I have heard some truly uninspired melodies in churches in England and in Lutheran and Catholic services (though some are excellent). Boring melodies don't encourage vigorous singing.

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of the whole body and sing with our hearts. I believe this is the worship God desires, rather than a worship that is decorous, reverent, but dead.

As for the individual, apart from corporate worship, if the music causes no harmful effects and if the lyrics are pure, virtuous, praiseworthy, and especially if they help the individual walk with God, God approves and blesses. Parents who take this approach—whatever their own tastes—will be less likely to alienate their children.

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